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ABSTRACT

A multicultural literature course at Loyola Marymount University (California) was designed to complicate ideas of culture with gender issues and explored a common but largely unexplored phenomenon--writers who write outside their own personal backgrounds and identities. The course drew from research on "women's way of knowing" and "women's way of writing." The first step in the course was reading cross-cultural and cross-gendered literature. The next phase involved students experimenting with cross-cultural and cross-gendered texts of their own. The students began with short, analytic assignments that helped them focus in on techniques authors used to create a character. Students then described a kitchen from the point of view of a man or a woman (whichever they were not) whose child had just died--they could not mention the death directly. The students then moved on to writing fiction. (Six student fiction excerpts are attached.) (RS)

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L Bannister

**Promoting Multicultural Education Through Creative Writing:
Crossing Cultures and Genders**

In the summer of 1997, I was lucky enough to be awarded an Irvine Foundation Grant to develop a new multicultural literature course that I envisioned as an opportunity to broaden and complicate our notions of culture. Loyola Marymount University has a core curriculum requirement that includes two courses in "American Cultures." These courses, one lower division and one upper division, are designed to introduce students to a comparative study of the five cultures that predominate in contemporary American society: African-American, Asian-American, Euro-American, Indian-American, and Latino-American. As such, these courses have done much to sensitize our students to the diversity of ethnic traditions that are extant in the United States. Of course, each of these five "generalized" cultural traditions has numerous subcultures within it that may be studied under the rubric "American Cultures." But the operative word in developing American Cultures courses at LMU had always been *ethnicity*. Although ethnicity is certainly an important factor in defining culture, it was my belief that it was certainly not the only factor. For example, gender, class, and age are arguably components of culture. Religious and political affiliation are also cultural constructs. However, at the time I applied for the Irvine Grant, ethnicity alone was seen as the primary factor in "culture."

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The course I planned to develop would complicate ethnic ideas of culture with gender issues, a relatively modest first step, I thought. My course was titled "Contemporary Literature: Cross-Cultural and Cross-Gendered." In it, I hoped to help students explore a common but largely unexplored phenomenon-- when writers write outside their own personal backgrounds and identities. Writers, under the general umbrella of fictional license, regularly engage in literary cross-dressing. Intrigued by authors who write about cultures-- specifically ethnicities and genders-- not their own, I wanted to explore with my students *how* and *why* authors *assumed* cultural and sexual identities through their characters. Of course, it is impossible to write fiction that does not cross, at least, gender lines, or all novels would be exclusively peopled by clones of the author. But what of works of fictions we judge to be excellent? What is it that makes an author particularly *successful* at literary cross-dressing. I wanted my students to evaluate a variety of contemporary fictional works, mindful that our reading was influenced by our own individual heritage, experience and gender. To assist in our reading, we drew from research on "women's way of knowing" (ala Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule) and "women's way of writing," explored by feminist theorists and writers such as Helené Cixous, Joyce Carol Oates, Elizabeth Flynn, Virginia Woolf, and Adrienne Rich. The available research on the intersection of stylistics and multiethnic writing is much more anecdotal, but we did look at linguistic treatments of African American, Latino, and Asian "voice." It was at the intersection of style and culture (broadly defined) that I hoped our course would particularly contribute.

I have taught the course twice thus far, and the texts I have assigned have include:

Snow Falling on Cedars, David Guterson
(An Anglo-American man writing about a Japanese American man and woman living in Puget Sound and the Japanese internment during World War II. This book was the winner of the 1995 PEN/Faulkner Award and the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award.)

The Remains of the Day, Kazuo Ishiguro
(A Japanese man writing about a British butler (male) and a British housekeeper (female). This book won the 1989 Booker Prize for Fiction.)

Brazil, John Updike
(An Anglo-American man writing about a Brazilian Black man and a Brazilian white woman. This book was nominated for a 1994 New York Times Book Award.)

What I Lived For, Joyce Carol Oates
(An Anglo-American woman writing about an Irish immigrant man growing up in upstate New York. This book was a 1995 PEN/Faulkner Award nominee and a 1995 Pulitzer nominee.)

Memories of a Geisha, Arthur Golden
(Golden is a Tennessean man writing about a Japanese woman who is sold into servitude as a Geisha by her father. Early reviews of Golden's bestseller have called it a "startling act of literary impersonation" and a "dazzling achievement of literary empathy.")

The Shipping News, E. Annie Proulx
(Proulx is a Canadian woman writing about a Brooklyn man (single father) who emigrates to New Foundland. This book won the 1993 National Book Award and the 1994 Pulitzer Prize.)

Reading cross-cultural and cross-gendered literature was a literary experience most of the students had already had, but rarely had the experience been so carefully examined. Most of the English Majors in the course were somewhat aware of the conundrum of sex, authorship, and authenticity in literary history. That is to say, they had heard the complaints about Heminway's inability to write realistic, substantive women characters; they had heard of Virginia Woolf's lament in A *Room on One's Own*,

and a few had even heard vague murmurings of the sometime scandals surrounding George Sand's and George Eliot's pseudonyms. But few of the students had considered the implications of an author's creative device when it was doubly or even triply "false." One American Cultures student had heard rumors about Anglo writers taking on Indian or Chicano names to get their books in print in the late 80's and early 90's when it was increasingly "fashionable" to be ethnic and canon boundaries were being redrawn.

None of the students had thought about the difficulties inherent in creating fictional worlds that were *not* in any way in an author's experience. We talked together about how such a task might be daunting or liberating, how all fiction is, after all, by definition, a lie. We talked about the success and popularity of science fiction and fantasy, and how those writers often invented culture and sex-- whole cloth! And we talked about how writers who were trying to create fictional worlds based in fact had a greater responsibility-- to mirror reality, to be accurate and thorough, or how it might also be a fictional goal to broaden a cultural perspective or to add to our understanding of gender roles... that sometimes writers would be treading on new cultural ground, ground of their own making. And wouldn't that be O.K.? And we talked about author's intentions and reader's perceptions, and the importance of research when experience wasn't available. And we talked about the value of book learning vs. experiential learning. And we talked about how Political Correctness had influenced all of the above considerations. These discussions arose before, during, and after our reading of the novels. No doubt such talk profoundly influenced the students' reading of the texts. Some admitted they never before raised issues of authenticity; if a book was in print, it

must be, in some sense, "true." That led us to one of our most interesting concerns. Did a novel have to be "true" to be good? And was "truth" insured if the author had the proper cultural credentials? As you might predict, these were some very provocative conversations, and fruitful ones as well, I think. For example, when we discussed Joyce Carol Oates' character, Corky Corcoran, the mid-forties Irish Catholic politician from upstate New York, we talked extensively about Oates' feminism and how that might have affected her rendering of this aging, blustery, insecure, sexually promiscuous, profane, violent man. Corky Corcoran's lengthy interior monologues are peppered with statements of misogynistic sexual bravado. Does a reader's knowledge of the author's gender and her feminism contribute to the believability of Corky as a character, or does it make him into a mere stereotype or even a hyperbolic parody of a man? We couldn't reach any firm conclusions (the class decided that to do that, we'd need at least three pools of reader-subjects --a control group who read the text without any knowledge of the author, a group who knew only that the author was female, and a group who had a full knowledge of Oates' life and previous work). But our discussions were enormously helpful in understanding all of the complex, interrelated factors that *can* affect an act of reading. And as the students raised their sensitivity to these factors, they became more informed readers, and finally, more appreciative readers, now more aware of the skill required to create "living" characters often far removed from an author's own life.

Reading cross-cultural and cross-gendered literature was only the first step in the course. The next phase involved students experimenting with writing cross-cultural and cross-gendered texts of their own. We began with short, analytic assignments that helped

students focus in on techniques authors used to create a character. We examined point of view voice, narrative technique, diction, syntax and more global issues like "theme" and purpose." These are, of course, normal things to examine in any literature course, but we looked at these fictional elements with new eyes, more critical, certainly, but also more awed. I then asked my students to experiment with the following writing assignment. Describe a kitchen from the point of view of a man or a woman (whichever you are *not*) whose child has just died. You can't directly mention the death or the child. Here are some of the results.

(DISTRIBUTE KITCHEN SAMPLES)

We then discussed in detail what features of the text signaled "male." or "female." How does a man express grief? A woman? We learned a lot about gender differences that day.

(IF TIME, BRIEFLY REVIEW KITCHEN SAMPLES)

Students were then able to use some of the same techniques they had observed or experimented with to help in creating their own fiction. Students also "researched" the culture and gender they assumed by talking to friends, watching relevant films, and even reading socio-anthropological research on culture and gender. Happily, many students asked me to recommend additional short stories and novels written *by and about* people of different cultures and genders. Some of the fiction students generated was extraordinary. Your handouts include some excerpts of this student-generated fiction, which is full of remarkably authentic dialogue and fascinating cultural detail. Students also workshopped their works-in-progress with their colleagues, learning a lot about

culture and gender in the process. Rather than recount these discussions to you, I thought it might be productive to do a brief cross-cultural/cross-gender exercise of our own.

(GIVE EXERCISE INSTRUCTIONS NOW)

-Half sheet of paper

-Write down a "culture" --be broad rather than narrow (Asian rather than South Korean).

-Write down a gender or sexual orientation (male, female, gay, lesbian).

-Give your paper to a colleague seated in the room.

-Now, begin a list of things you'll need to do to sound like a person of this culture/gender (for example, an Asian speaker might speak reservedly or little in a large group setting or an African-American woman might, if we generalize, be a combination of bossy and nurturing in tone).

-Your list is just a brainstorming, nothing more (3-5 min).

-Now share your list with the colleague who gave it to you. Tell each other which features seem the most compelling, those that have the ring of truth?

-Why do these features seem authentic? What makes them different from "mere stereotype"?

(ASK A FEW PARTICIPANTS TO SHARE THE BEST OF LISTS AND DESCRIBE THEIR TEAM'S CONVERSATION.)

Our discussion today suggests some of the rich insights available to students in a course focusing on cross culture and gender.

Student Fiction Exerpt #1

My Gender: Male/Fiction Gender: Transexual (wants to be female)
My Race: White/Fiction Race: Puerto Rican

"Vendras conmigo" dije - sin que nadie supiera
donde y como latia mi estado doloroso,
y para mi no habia clavel ni barcarola,
nada sino una herida por el amor abierta.

Repeti: ven conmigo, como si me muriera,
y nadie vio en mi boca la luna que sangraba,
nadie vio aquella sangre que subia al ailencio.
Oh amor olvidemos la estrella con espinas!

Por eso cuando oi que tu voz repetia
"Vendras conmigo" - fue como si desataras
dolor, amor, la furia del vino encarcelado

que desde su bodega sumergida subiera
y otra vez en mi boca senti un sabor de llama,
de sangre y de claveles, de pierdra y quemadura.

Come with me, I said, and no one knew
where, or how my pain throbbed,
no carnations or barcaroles for me,
only a wound that love had opened.

I said it again: *Come with me*, as if I were dying,
and no one saw the moon that bled in my mouth
or the blood that rose into the silence.
O Love, now we can forget the star that has such thorns!

That is why, when I heard your voice repeat
Come with me, it was as if you had let loose
the grief, the love, the fury of a cork-trapped wine

that geysers flooding from deep in its vault:
in my mouth I felt the taste of fire again,
of blood and carnations, of rock and scald.

Pablo Neruda

November 28, 1994 - 1:06 am:

When those putos from Los Jaros get back, they won't find my fine ass here. This kind of shit I do *not* need. Where did Richie put my fucking shoes, anyway? *Come with me, walk awhile, bonita, I know how to treat a lady! Why you lookin' around? We don't need your friend, mami, **you** all the woman I need. Laughter in the glow of the arc lamp*

outside Luna's and I can smell the O.E. on his breath but maybe he'll be sweet, maybe he'll where the fuck ***is*** *Magdalena anyways? His hand firmly around my waist. Can he tell? Well, baby that's his problem but ay no not another grand revelation scene like Luis the gape-mouthed player and his "Shit, bitch, you tell a man that shit* ***before*** *you fuck!"*

Maricón! Bastard broke my heel. Hustling me up those fire stairs so fast, so eager to "serve my ass" as he so sweetly put it, my golden-toothed Prince Charming. And me. Ah, Yasmin. Poor pathetic Yasmin closing her eyes and seeing mami the night she and papi (no, these stories never bored her like they did Nito) snuck off down the alley to *their* fire escape. *Very* West Side Story. But Richie's no Tony and I won't be singing "A Place for Us" tonight. Quite a Maria I make, too, with this busted lip and chipped tooth, but shit, didn't that fool see "The Crying Game"? *Yeah, baby, oh yeah, I like it like that pushing my face away and laying me down, going down , and I hold my breath cause this is it, this decides between sweet sweetness and pain and humiliation like Ramon (who knew, too, that closet-cased cabron!) running out of my room and the hall light and Nito and papi in the hall just looking, looking as Ramon pulled up his pants cursing me "faggot, twisted puto bitch!" and papi not comprehending till he saw my mascara and mami urging him back to bed and Nito "ah, shit , Henry, what the fuck is* ***wrong*** *with you, fool? "*

Fucking Magdalena and my *keys* ! Maybe she's still at Luna's getting her ass polished by that redheaded white boy with the wife who has no clue her Beemer-selling stud likes Latino transexuals (or would-be tranis, neither of them had saved up enough at the flower shop to buy their dream cunts quite yet). I guess that particular subject rarely makes its way into Better Homes and Gardens. Hijola! $150 at Nine West (and in a 10 1/2 !) and they're *ruined* ! And for what? He was planning a little surprise, my Richie, my Tony, my papi-prince charming. At least you could say he was generous, wanting to share me, his good fortune, with his pinche vato friends. I guess mami was right, and the Virgin Mary watches over even queers like me, and instead of getting gang-banged I got gang bashed. *Count your blessings, mijo, you could have*

the AIDS and remember, sabes que soy siempre tu mamá, baby. Papi gave me some money for you, no, really, he wants you to be happy. I got to get up out of here and do something about this lip. A girl's face is her calling card, cláro que sí! Besides, those fuckers are liable to have thought up some new ideas on how to amuse themselves with the trani from 89th street. I'll miss that one, thanks, boys.

What goes on on these stairs I do not even want to know, Maria and Jose! Cum, trash and forties and so much crap that I can just see myself falling and *hit it fool, shit you just close your eyes and think you're busting some exceptionally tight, stinky pussy! Drunken laughter of the borráchos seeming to come from everywhere at once as I wipe the blood from my nose where my prince backhanded me a moment before and now I'm bent over the edge of the tub, knees on cold tile and someone, maybe my prince making good on his promise to prove his expertise in dealing with a lady? no it's someone else and he's hesitating, hovering. "Go on fool, you know it don't go beyond this room, teach the faggot queer (ay, they are so eloquent above 102 nd!) what he's getting himself into coming to a* **real** *man's crib! " I mutter something about fool's who don't know what they're getting into, straight guys (they think) walking into a bar full of drag queens and transexuals and they wonder where the pussy's gone? and I'm bleeding agian, this time from the lip and that's not all. Cesar, for that's the name I hear around me in drunken, rhythmic chanting, has decided to take the Nestea plunge and oh Christ - papi I wish I could have grown up straight for you but fuck that I'm more of a woman than those pious cunts from Our Lady who whisper their brúja gossip when mami enters a room without even caring she sees them and knows exactly what they're saying about her freak faggot son what a shame .*

At least it's not snowing. No P.R. she'd ever known had taken easily to New York winters and even she, freak though she can't help but seem to their eyes, is like them at least in their despair when the mercury falls below freezing. Hugging herself against the chill (snow or not, it's still November), Yasmin the girl with something extra (but hopefully not for long!) hurries along Grand till she sees the black and white sidle up, and then of course the lights. Then the flashlight directly into her eyes and she wonders what they must make of her in her current state, Mabeline with hemoglobin hi-lites. Of course she stops. Take a good long look. Like you haven't seen this kind of shit a thousand times. But she was no whore, and she was taking no more shit tonight, cop or no cop.

Student Fiction Excerpt #2

My Gender: Female/ Fiction Gender: Male
My Race: Anglo/Fiction Race: Black, Inner-city

Black and Blues Street

A slow day. No action. Remmy watches, above them, from his top window in their bottom-class land. Small circles peering. Cat eyes they would have seemed if anyone ever looked up.

"Keep-a-walking 'till the bottom falls out," Remmy chants. "RING. . . RING. . . RING. . . . A telephone on the floor shrieks spasmodically. Have to get that fixed. No money. Just ringing in the ears—can deal. He kneels down to the phone. It used to chill on crates which started to splinter—no longer dignified. Must work harder to maintain in the city.

Reaches for the phone but goes to the floor. Picks a potato chip off the rug. How it missed his glance when cleaning, he does not know. In the trash it goes. Back to the phone, hand firmly on the receiver and lifts it aborting a final ring—absent sound still jerking in his ears finishes the unfulfilled spasm

"Speak," Remmy booms in his sonorous voice. He waits. Still he waits. He continues to wait until patience no longer is dignified. Then he hangs up. A man is only a man as long as he keeps his own rhythm. He begins to sway on his power. Alone and in charge.

Five-o-clock glaring. The numbers on the clock a nauseating yellow. Remmy walks to the hall closet. Sings his steps, "Hand on the knob—beat—turning—beat beat—open the door—beat—stare." Acutely aware of each movement. Must be meaning in everything. Bound to find it somewhere.

Reaches for one suit among no others. So much space with nothing to fill it. Just two pieces of black velvet. A grin larger than night rests on his face. Everyday is Halloween when you're being someone you're not. The costume makes all the difference. The jacket—clean, pressed, double breast—hanging under plastic. The black pants—perfectly folded, molded on the hanger, not a single wrinkle—chillin' on a separate rod across the closet. Everything has its place. Remmy makes it so. RING! RING! RING! Jolted, Remmy leaps, turns around. His guard is down. A sound, a noise outside of himself, momentarily gets to him. "Ignore it," he chants. "Just stay cooooool, man." Gotta keep the groove to make it through.

Remmy shifts his hips, butt twitching to the sound starting to stir in his head. Again he is stable. Turns from the phone and takes the hangers from the closet, suit draped like hot molasses. Hand flat on the door and SLAM—perfect staccato. Brings the bag to his face, deep breath through his nose, the plastic sucked tight to his nostrils, only wisps of air passing by. Breathing in and out, in and out, in and out until half suffocation jerks him back—time to get dressed.

Naked, Remmy checks out his chalky black skin in the mirror. Nail across his chest making marks, drawing lines no one can pass. Slips the pants off the hanger and glides them, sleek black velvet, over knobby knees, up his thighs, tucks his instrument, a bit arise, and fastens it with buttons. Flexes his arms. The undulating muscles look like music.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! Yellow numbers flash and scream that it is six-o-clock. Remmy spins full like a wheel to see what the deal with the clock is. Only half-dressed, but can't get to him now, the velvet seeping in his blood. So much noise in this city. But it turns to music if you use it right. Slides on the jacket that some mamma once called a coat—ha, ha—over fingers, wrists, arms, a chest of hairs like dark, wiry snakes charmed by the jacket's black magic. Turns back to the mirror filled to the brim with velvet. Now that's a good-looking man.

Author: Male
(Woman's POV on Kitchen)

The kitchen is quiet. The lights do not shine as bright as they used to. They seem to have dimmed to a pale yellow. Utensils and toys lay strewn above the kitchen as evidence of previous chaos. The dishes aren't done and there's dirty plates still on the table. To find a clean spoon somewhere in this mess could be an obvious challenge, and the constant dripping noise coming from the faucet can drive any person crazy as it cuts through the surrounding silence. On the refrigerator there hangs precious works of art. Pictures of sunshine and smiling faces stare out from the painted papers. This kitchen is dirty. It needs to be cleaned so that order and normalcy can return. Is that plant on the corner dying? Nobody has been paying attention to it and it's hunger for water and sunlight have been denied. Whose job was it to keep this plant alive? When did you stop paying attention to the plant in the corner?

Author: Male
(Man's POV on Kitchen)

He droops in the wooden chair that occasionally creaks under his weight, and doesn't try to control the tears falling. "There's no witnesses here," he understands. The thought pulls his eyes around the table to the one... two... three... four chairs. "That one, the one I now breathe on will never be filled again," he realizes. The chair, now looking smaller than the rest, starts to lose shape in the tears.

The cheap oven clock clicks to a new minute. Soccer practice should be starting soon. The father twists his face to the clock in expressions of rage and sorrow, until he looks past it. Inches to the right, a small magnetic photo crooked on the refrigerator.

Author: Female
(Man's POV on Kitchen)

I don't know what it looks like. I don't remember and I really don't care right now. If you really have to know, well the refrigerator-- the door-- it was always so cluttered with things on display or with those damn cabinets above it. The doors on the cabinets always open. I remember all the junk food and cereal inside-- Raisin Bran, Bran Flakes, Wheat and Bran, Cap'n Crunch, Oreos, Gummi Bears, and... you know, I really don't want to talk to you, let alone describe a damn kitchen.

Author: Female
(Woman's POV on Kitchen)

Outside of the large kitchen window the sun was beating brightly. But the room seemed gloomy. She remembers the opening of the fridge. It used to open a hundred times a day. Now, it just stood there with no motion. She remembers all the conversations that took place near the counter when she would come home from work. The digging through drawers for hammers, tape, all the random things. She stood frozen with the memories. Memories were all she had. Tears stated to fall as she recalled walking into the kitchen to find ice cream and milk splattered because the blender top had not been put on. Nothing felt right, the room felt empty. She knew there would be no more running home from work to make sure dinner was ready, she didn't need to anymore.